Hi. My name is Carl Malamud. I've been hearing about "Internet Governance" more and more, so I decided to go see for myself what all the fuss was about. I wrote to the ITU and asked for permission to attend the WSIS summit as a member of the press. They turned me down several times for not being "bona fide media," whatever that means, but eventually they bought my story that I was a stringer for the Bangkok Post and said I could attend. I bought a couple of cameras and headed for the big shindig in Tunisia.

With all the VIPs and VVIPs attending, hotels were at a premium, so I ended up at a resort 70 km away from the convention center. Having a day to kill after snagging my press credentials, I wandered around taking some photos. The guy in the suit on the very right with the phone to his ear was evidently some kind of security functionary, because when he saw me take a picture of the moon coming up over the palm trees, he told me the activity was forbidden and threatened to arrest me. I put my camera away and found a bar.

The VVIPs (that is a real term, believe it or not!) came flying in with their private planes, red carpets, motorcades, and all the other accoutrements of power. This was clearly a Really Big Deal® and the rest of us in the hoi polloi spent hours waiting in lines to undergo security checks. I counted over 100 policemen standing on the freeway on the ride into town, and my bus driver turned out to be an Air Force fighter pilot helping out for the week. I made a mental note to behave myself.

The presidents of many important countries, including Tunisia, Switzerland, and Intel, all gave big speeches. And, of course, the host of the party, the Honorable Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, gave a really, really big speech. It was fascinating to hear all these VVIPs talk about the importance of equitable distribution of IP addresses, the placement of root name servers, and, of course, the subject of Internet Governance.

As is traditional in industry, every conference has to have a trade show, and this one was a lulu. Hundreds of booths, and lots of action on the floor. In the Tunisian booth, a lucky functionary got to re-read his President's speech over and over. Industry players touted their solutions, and some really big money went into some of the setups.

The Internet even had a booth! The Internet Society, ICANN, and the RIRs all pooled their money together and got a little piece of real estate in the corner. Traffic wasn't as heavy as the folks giving away free food, but it was fun watching people like RIPE NCC founder Daniel Karrenberg doing booth bunny duty. John Crain, the CTO of ICANN spent a lot of time repeating "we don't control the Internet."
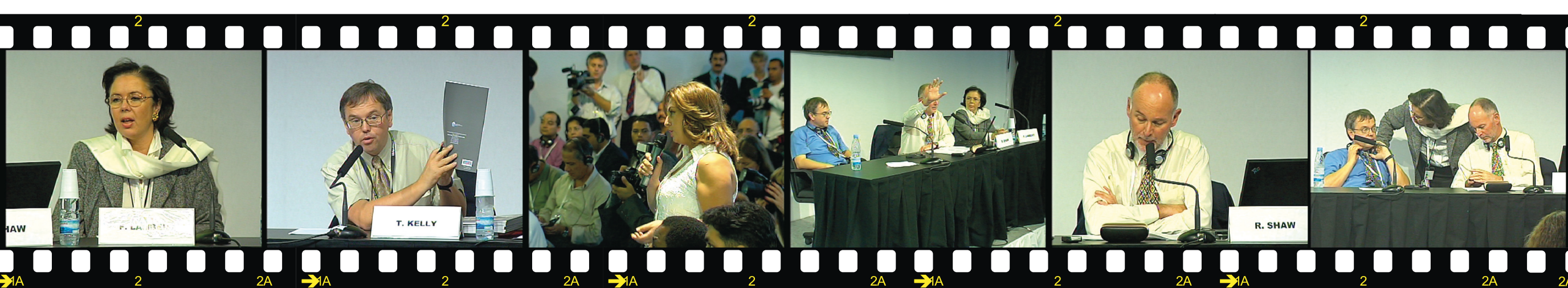
The big outcome of the back-room negotiations that led up to the summit was the creation of a new Internet Governance Forum. The ITU held many press conferences to brief the press about why this forum was a new breakthrough in governance. Many people made many trips for many years to create this framework. The outcome was in doubt until midnight before the conference opened, but an international consensus was formed.

The U.S. president was tied up with other matters, but he sent an Ambasador and an Under Secretary. They stressed that nothing had happened. The new Forum had no authority and the U.S. Department of Commerce had not given up any of it's long-held self-proclaimed oversight of the Internet.

The Internet wasn't really an official participant in this whole process. The Internet Society, the RIRs, and ICANN were lumped in with the rest of the civil society, which meant they couldn't use the real press conference rooms. Instead, they managed to shanghai one of the vendor presentation rooms to state their case. ICANN said they were pleased with the outcome, the Internet Society was pleased, everybody seemed happy. If nothing happened, what were these 20,000 attendees doing in Tunis?

One of the goals of the WSIS process was bridging the digital divide. One good thing did happen at Tunis, the unveiling of the $100 laptop by Nicholas Negroponte. Kofi Anan joined the press conference, and Alan Kaye even dropped by. By my estimates, the whole WSIS process cost close to $200 million. One has to wonder if the digital divide might have been better served by forgoing the summit altogether and simply buying 2 million laptops instead.

After Tunis, I set out to find out what really happened. First stop was Amsterdam, home of the RIPE NCC. The Regional Internet Registries were widely acknowledged as doing a great job of building a bottom-up, regionally-inclusive process, so modulo a few blandishments by a few heads of state about more equitable distribution of IP addresses, from the point of view of the RIRs, nothing much did really happen in Tunis. Axel Pawlik and Daniel Karrenberg remain wary, but they've gone back to running their registry.


When I need perspective on things, I always find it useful to go see Rob Blokzijl, who works out of a high-energy physics laboratory on the outskirts of Amsterdam. He reminded me that the ITU has spent two decades trying to find their role in the Internet. They embraced the OSI protocols, but despite a huge effort by the Geneva standards bodies and the European Commission, nothing much happened. With telephone networks converting to an IP core, doesn't it make sense that they're looking for a new role?
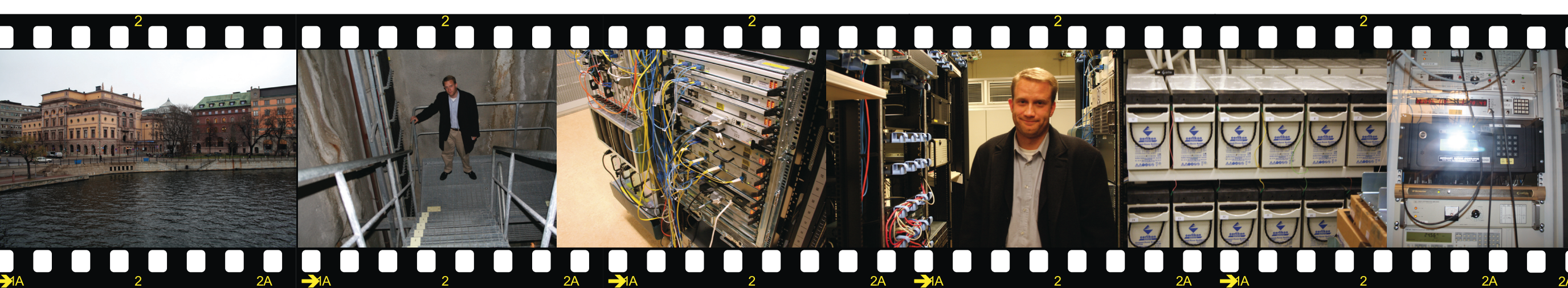
There's been a lot of FUD about how the root servers of the DNS shouldn't be run by a "bunch of volunteers." I went to Stockholm to see Kurtis Lindqvist, who runs one of the 13 root servers. He made me promise not to disclose the location, then escorted me into a military bunker deep underground to show me one of the instances of the "I" server, which is replicated in several locations (like most of the other root servers). A very military-grade, industrial operation! At the far right is Peter Lothberg's homemade atomic clock.

In Tokyo, the "M" is also replicated in many locations and is subject to equally rigorous operational and security constraints. Again promising not to disclose the location, I was escorted through 3 levels of increasingly secure checkpoints into one of the most modern colocation facilities on the planet. This seems like a pretty well-run operation and I'm not sure I want to see root servers run by random government bureaucracies.
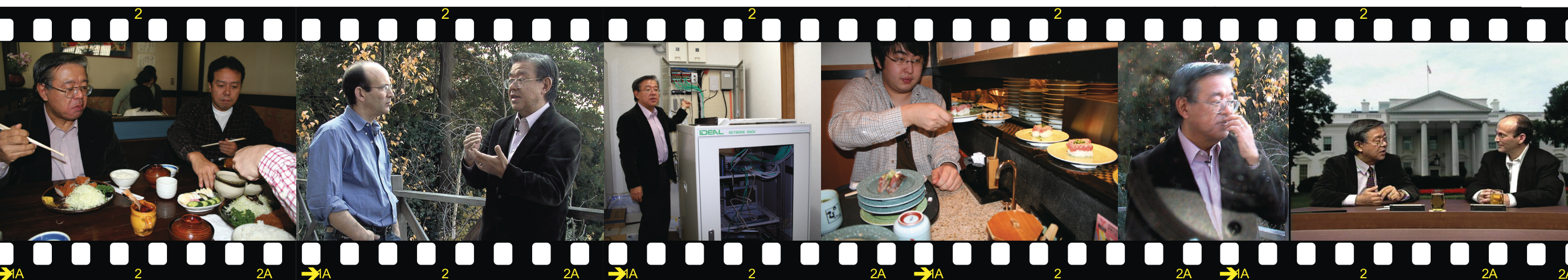
In Tokyo, I paid a courtesy call to interview Jun Murai, widely acknowledged as the father of the Japanese Internet and a former key player on the ICANN board. Inbetween meals of tonkatsu and RFID-enabled sushi, I got the impression that he didn't view the Internet Governance Forum as anything significant. Something to watch, perhaps, but not something to worry about. Jun then played turn-around and interviewed me. We picked a White House backdrop so I could trash the Bush administration's tech policies.

On the way across the Pacific, I stopped in Hawaii for a day to see Randy Bush, Chief Scientist for IIJ and somebody who has long done public service for the Internet community. Randy was instrumental in helping get many countries in the developing world on-line and he reminded that much of the structure of Internet Governance today, including the standards bodies, are oriented around the northern hemisphere. What should government do? Instead, he asks, what can _you_ do to help develop this bottom-up infrastructure?

Next stop was the ICANN meeting in Vancouver. After all the hooptedoodle in Tunis about the role of ICANN from the 20,000 attendees at the summit, it was an interesting contrast to see a largely empty room discussing fairly humdrum affairs. The hot topics were new top level domains for pornography and, of course, VeriSign's continued hold over the Domain Name System. People lined up at the microphones to criticize the board over the recent settlement with VeriSign, a deal worth way too much money.

I've always felt that the whole Domain Name System "industry" was worth way too much money and attracted, at least in some quarters, a rather shady sort. So, I found it ironic that the gala entertainment sponsored by some DNS registrars was a casino. The attendees didn't seem to see how speculation in Domain Names and a no-holds barred gambling social might shed some light on their industry. Poor Vint Cerf, woozy from 12 hours of meetings, got roped into a picture with the showgirls before escaping to dinner.

Leaving the ICANN meeting, I flew down to San Francisco, where I promptly headed towards the global corporate headquarters of the Internet Systems Consortium. In a building that looks from the outside like an abandoned warehouse, ISC has carved out offices, a half-dozen machine rooms, and home for a motley collection of hosted services. My server, for example, has lived in this building for a dozen years. ISC runs the F-root (which is, natch, located in real secure colo facilities), produces BIND, and does much other useful work.

ISC is the brainchild of Paul Vixie, who rewrote BIND because the code base at the time "looked like it was written by a bunch of college students." In addition to spreading the F-root server to several dozen countries around the world using anycast, Paul was instrumental in building neutral exchange facilities like PAIX. He's an active participant in the ICANN process, but as evidence that ICANN doesn't really have much control over the root operators, he also participates in the Open Root Server Network Project.

Dan Lynch used to run the machine room at ISI, where Postel and Mockapetris dreamed up the Domain Name System. He lives up in the Napa Valley wine country, where he's installed a used Cray supercomputer for a bench in his vinyard and keeps a spare Ipsilon router in the corner of his garden. When Dan "ran" the DNS, Mockapetris used to stroll over with the patch-of-the-day. Did he think the Internet would be this big? "You bet." Did he think names would be worth money? "That was a surprise."

Karl Auerbach is no fan of ICANN. While sitting on their board of directors, he sued the body over his right to examine internal records. Karl is a lawyer by training and a geek by avocation. He feels very strongly about lack of transparency and just as strongly over ICANN policies that ration the issuance of new top-level domains. Does that mean he wants the ITU to take over the function? Interesting thought, but let's be careful before stepping out of the fire into the volcano.


Vint Cerf runs ICANN. One of the much-honored "fathers" of the Internet, Vint stepped into the ICANN position during a firestorm of controversy following Esther Dyson's reign as the first chair. Is ICANN doing a good job? He thinks so. Could it do better? He thinks so. Are they taking steps towards making it better? He thinks so. What about the ITU taking over that role? Vint looses his friendly attitude when that subject comes up.

I talked to many other people. Patrik Fälström got heavily involved with the Swedish delegation. Tim O'Reilly used to be a UUCP hacker. Geoff Goodfellow maintained the hosts file. Paul Mockapetris invented the DNS. Brad Templeton chairs EFF. Hal Varian, a professor at the U. of California, was involved in a National Academy study on the DNS. Brian Reid helped invent email. A unanimous opinion? Not a chance. But, they all think we can do better. You'll be able to hear what they think when I start posting the video.

★ NIGHT IN TUNISIA ★

"Night in Tunisia" is a video documentary about Internet Governance, world domination, and what role (if any) governments should play. The research consists of gathering a large number of video interviews, "B" roll, and photographs, and crafting the material into a documentary. The raw footage will be posted to the Internet so that if you don't like my movie, you can make your own. The project started in November, 2005 with initial production. Most of the raw footage has been digitized and is currently being processed. You should start seeing core interviews by summer of 2006 and the hope is to wrap the project up by the end of the summer. This poster previews some of that work.
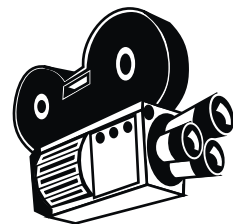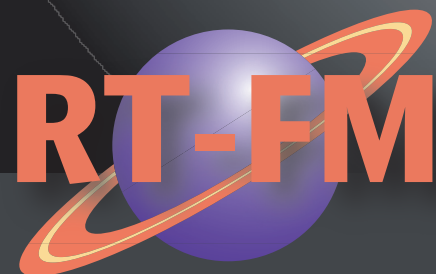
Production of "Night in Tunisia" is made possible by the generous support of:

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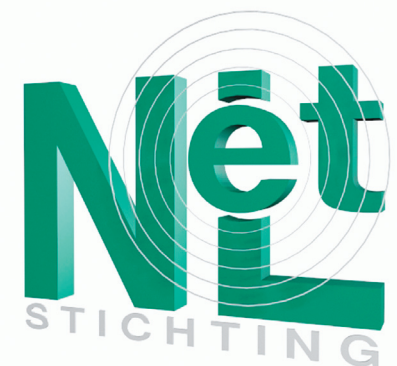
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